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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 001851

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FROM AMBASSADOR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/20/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KMPI](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: PARTING THOUGHT FROM THE AMBASSADOR ON MEPI

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Hudson reason 1.5 (e)

11. (C/NF) I would like to share what I hope will be some impressions on the MEPI program in the hope that they might be useful to others as this program evolves. Since my arrival at post, our number one MPP priority has been support for greater democracy and human rights in Tunisia, and our post is the home of one of the MEPI Regional Offices. I trust that my comments will be received as coming from someone who has welcomed MEPI and supported its goals.

12. (C/NF) I would like to call NEA,s attention to three aspects of the MEPI process that I have found frustrating and counterproductive: failure to coordinate adequately with COMs and Country Teams; encroaching bureaucracy from the Washington end; and lack of clarity regarding MEPI,s role within NEA priorities.

13. (C/NF) It is easy to imagine that a sure way to unsettle an Ambassador and lose her/his support for a MEPI program is for it to appear suddenly with the goal of engaging important audiences and persons in the country of her/his assignment without her/his having known about it. An ambitious MEPI-funded program looms on the horizon and the COM must scramble to: a) inform her/himself about it; b) decide the degree of support or engagement s/he should offer the program; and c) seek to modify the program,s content or approach, based on the Country Team,s knowledge of local conditions. Without COM and Country Team assistance, many of these programs would founder and fail. With earlier, meaningful COM and Country Team involvement, they would not have been in a position to fail. In some cases, the COM and Country Team would have known and counseled that the program was ill advised and should not be funded or supported. The recent MEPI-sponsored media RFA, for example, as written, seemed to seek to fund projects in a way that is a violation of Tunisian (and several other countries') law. The highest levels of the GOT made it very clear to us that funding of Tunisian media projects as proposed in the RFA would be illegal, and actively discouraged Tunisians from trying to fund their media projects through the RFA.

14. (C/NF) Many posts complain about the amount of time MEPI-related activities consume. No embassy has been granted additional "MEPI" officers, yet someone must take up the extra work. It may surprise you to learn that we in Tunis have no complaints about our investment of time in MEPI, mainly because what the Initiative seeks to promote happens to be our number one MPP priority. The source of my concern in this area is that our collective efforts do not seem to produce results that advance our policy. To my mind, this frustration is directly linked to my above concern about the absence of the COM and Country Team in the decision-making process. Our MEPI Committee (which is headed by the DCM) can spend hours and hours evaluating SPAs or RFPs or a range of proposals or candidates for a program, rank-order them,

submit qualitative and quantitative commentary on them, and fill out form after form only to find that, in the end, the post's opinion was overlooked or overruled in the award of a grant, fellowship, or contract. Worse, grantees whose projects the post did not endorse often turn up demanding considerable logistical and political support to accomplish what they are being paid far more than our officers are to deliver. If the post had no input into the selection or approval of a grantee or project - or possibly even opposed it - that post is unlikely to be enthusiastic about spending its weekend clearing up last-minute political and logistical problems the implementer has encountered.

¶15. (C/NF) I fully recognize that the obvious answer to my first two concerns could be that the COM and Country Team need to involve themselves more fully in all aspects of MEPI and need to pay closer attention to its inner workings. Post MEPI Committees and/or the MEPI RO should be keeping COMs up to date and in the loop. I assure you that my MEPI Committee and the Regional Office we host have done exactly that -- to the extent of their ability to understand what is going on in Washington -- and that brings me to my final concern. I leave you with two observations on what I believe to be the source of the disconnect. First, since MEPI is a relatively new program that involves significant new bureaucratic and decision-making processes, I would argue that it is incumbent on NEA/PI to proactively integrate itself into the Bureau, to insist that Offices and Desks not just clear ideas and documents but fully understand them, and that COMs and other officers are always given explanations of proposals and opportunities to participate in decision-making. Ideally, key NEA/PI information and requests/taskings would come through front-channel cables rather than emails to post or the Regional Office. Without the formality of a

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front-channel message, it is sometimes difficult to determine priority for the many requests we receive. Second, NEA/FO needs to clarify for COMs the importance it places on COMs, personal attention to MEPI*and to assure COMs that their MEPI-related engagement will be rewarded with FO support. Simply put, COMs cannot be expected to guess whether MEPI priorities are more important than other NEA priorities on a case-by-case basis. NEA should speak with one voice.

¶16. (C/NF) I submit these comments out of great respect and support for what MEPI. I suspect, however, that I am not alone in suggesting that the above conditions do not help us achieve them.

HUDSON